

SOIL AND WATER *Resources*

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Soil and Water Conservation Program Work Group Update

At the March 10 Soil and Water Districts Commission meeting, program director Bryan Hopkins stressed the need to establish Soil and Water Conservation Program work groups. The concept is to get all the relevant partners of the program together in a room, facilitate discussion and coordinate input on various elements of the program. Stakeholders involved in SWCP work groups will look at the myriad of issues facing the program.

The topic of each workgroup will determine the appropriate program partner participation. For example, if the work group is to look at future practice development, this would be a very technical discussion and that would influence who would be interested or relevant to participate.

The most immediate need is to look at the districts' cost-share delivery and what it takes to support those efforts in the districts. This work group will meet on June 3. The location is still being established. Steve Radcliff, Missouri Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts president, has offered to represent the district supervisors and Sandy Hutchison, Missouri Soil and Water Conservation District Employees Association, will be representing the district employees. Farm Bureau has expressed interest in sending a representative to the session, as well as the Missouri Chapter of the Land Improvement Contractors of America, or LICA. Commodity groups and other agricultural organizations that may have an interest in attending this meeting will also be invited. All of the ex-officio members and partners to the commission (Natural Resource Conservation Service, University of Missouri Extension, Department of Conservation, Department of Agriculture, etc.) have expressed interest in sending a representative as well. Dave Baker, University of Missouri Extension, will serve in the facilitator's role.

This is to be an open process, with minutes taken and a report developed and made available online for public comment.

FY 2010 Budget Rescission

In February, the Soil and Water Conservation Program was instructed to enact a rescission of \$2,269,245 for the remainder of fiscal year 2010. This reduction was implemented by removing \$2 million from the cost-share budget while the remainder was taken from the program office budget.

Districts were allowed to submit cost-share contracts until the reduced budget of \$24 million was reached. In less than a week, that dollar amount was met and no new FY 2010 cost-share contracts will be accepted for the remainder of the fiscal year.

The \$269,245 cut from the program office budget was taken out of research grants, equipment and expenses funding, IT support, employer's contributions to state deferred compensation and other administrative funds.



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In addition, the program is taking steps to ensure this year's budget is balanced and to address concerns for next year's program budget. This year's SALT funds were limited to \$4.6 million. Since slightly more than this amount was already obligated, there was an immediate cease of new SALT contracts for the remainder of FY2010. "Living within this budget is a strict and necessary goal," said program director Brian Hopkins. "Overspending this appropriation is not an option." Also, a hiring justification process has been implemented. District requests for rehires must be reviewed and approved by program staff before a vacated position can be filled.

Qualifying Criteria Questions Implemented in MoSWIMS

On Feb. 26, qualifying criteria questions were implemented in MoSWIMS for five cost-share practices. The goal is to highlight common errors that have been noticed in the contract development process prior to the contract being formalized. The five practices that now have qualifying questions are:

- DSL-1 Permanent Vegetative Cover Establishment.
- DSL-2 Permanent Vegetative Cover Improvement.
- DSP-2 Permanent Vegetative Cover Enhancement.
- DSL-1 I Permanent Vegetative Cover on Critical Areas.
- DSL-1 I I Permanent Vegetative Cover – Confined Animal Feed Lots.

Qualifying criteria questions are contained in the Notes screen in MoSWIMS. The questions require a response before the system will allow submission of a contract for approval or printing. These questions are not designed to encompass all commission policies. District personnel still have the responsibility to adhere to all commission policies contained in the cost-share handbook. It is hoped that this initiative will allow the program office to reach a point of reduced review on a significant number of practices.

Qualifying criteria questions will be implemented for different practices in phases as they are developed. The program hopes to have them established for all cost-share practices in the upcoming months.

CMT/Toolkit Strategy

Program staff is currently working with contractors to develop an integration of a mapping tool in conjunction with MoSWIMS. If such a tool is implemented, it would allow users to pull existing conservation layers from NRCS toolkit and perform the necessary mapping for each contract as developed in MoSWIMS. Once appropriate features are added to the map, an interface tool would allow toolkit data to be updated and the map generated would be associated with that particular contract. A major advantage of this tool is that it eliminates dual entry into MoSWIMS and the NRCS toolkit system.

The Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative

To improve the health of the Mississippi River Basin, including water quality and wildlife habitat, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS has developed the Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative, or MRBI. Through this new initiative, NRCS and its partners will provide financial assistance to help producers in selected watersheds in 12 states in the Mississippi River Basin implement voluntarily conservation practices that avoid, control and trap nutrient runoff; improve wildlife habitat and maintain agricultural productivity. NRCS will offer this initiative beginning this year, and as available for an additional three years, dedicating approximately \$80 million in each fiscal year.

The Soil and Water Conservation Program is coordinating the Missouri Department of Natural Resource's contributions to MRBI partner proposals. In addition, SWCP staff has developed a template to assist partners in making proposals as highly competitive as possible to maximize the federal grant dollars that can be brought into the state for addressing nutrient impacts to water quality.

During the March 26 telephone conference Soil and Water District Commission meeting, the commission approved allocating up to \$500,000 to assist districts whose proposals are selected in this competitive process. The current vision for SWCP targeted funding is to support supplemental water quality monitoring efforts and for implementation of priority conservation practices by providing additional incentive or cost-share payments.

New Guidance for Election Procedures

During the telephone conference Soil and Water Districts Commission meeting on March 26, the commission clarified its policy on the hours polls must be open during district board elections. The commissioners indicated their intent of the policy was to have the polls open for a minimum of six hours on the day of the election, with the polls open into the evening hours to give landowners an opportunity to vote after they get off work.

If a district will not be holding an annual meeting in conjunction with the election, the commission's policy is to have the polls open for the hours of noon to 6 p.m. If a district will be holding an annual meeting in the evening, the polls have to be open by noon in a central location and may close temporarily to be moved to the annual meeting location. However, to receive the reimbursement for following the commission's voluntary participation policy, the polls must be open for a total of six hours that day. If the polls open at noon and are closed for one hour to move to the annual meeting, then the polls should remain open until 7 p.m. These times should be advertised.



Rice Production Research Update

Gene Stevens, Ph.D., of the University of Missouri Delta Research Center, gave an update on the Nitrogen Fertilization for Sprinkler Irrigated Rice research at the March 10 Soil and Water Districts Commission meeting. Stevens reported the findings of the second year of the three-year project, which is funded by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources' parks, soils and water sales tax.

The goal of the research, which is being conducted in the Missouri Bootheel, is to find a more environmentally friendly process for successful rice production. Traditionally, rice is grown on clay soils under flood irrigation to reduce weed control. Flood irrigation has a high energy cost and has the potential to impact groundwater recharge. Rice requires high nitrogen inputs for good yields, however, nitrogen leaching through soils and in runoff can impact water quality. The project is evaluating using sprinkler irrigated rice in regards to water usage, energy costs, nitrogen fertilizer requirements and pesticide use.

In 2009, four factors addressing rice production were addressed as follows:

- Irrigation Management – The Arkansas Irrigation Scheduling Program was modified to include an experimental water-use function for rice and used to schedule irrigation throughout the season. Soil moisture sensors were installed and transmitted to a computer server and Web page.
- Weed Control – Resistant varieties are very important for sprinkler irrigated rice. The timing for herbicide application is critical for weed control. Herbicide can be applied successfully through the pivot system.
- Nitrogen Fertilization – In 2009, the best treatment was 135 pounds per acre of nitrogen compared to the normal 150 pounds. It was split into several applications.
- Blast Disease Control – Rice yields were highest in blast susceptible varieties when fungicides were applied at early boot stage using an injection pump to deliver fungicide through the pivot irrigation system.

In his summary of the 2009 tests, Stevens recommended the following:

- Plant blast resistant cultivars.
- Scout for diseases.
- Use scheduled irrigation.
- Split nitrogen applications.
- Chemigate/fertigate to save time.
- Spray weeds when they are small.

For more information about this study and the current results, contact Colleen Meredith at the Soil and Water Conservation Program at 573-751-6777.

District Grants Eligible Expenses

Due to the down turn in the economy and the recent budget rescission, Soil and Water Conservation Program staff is conducting a review of district grants to ensure that the funding is being used to support priority functions, to identify any efficiency gains and to address any questionable expenses.

The following items are not appropriate for payment from the parks, soils and water sales tax:

- Clothing.
- Promotional items.
- Door prizes (for meetings).
- Meals or snacks for board meetings lasting less than three hours.
- Computers, scanners and printers (printer cartridges, rollers, etc. will be allowed).
- All out-of-state travel will have to be reviewed by the Soil and Water Conservation Program for prior approval.
- Expenses for external district Web sites. (Note: A state SWCP hosted Web site has been made available for each district to utilize for maintaining a Web presence).
- Expenses associated with support of a district's equipment rental or sales programs (including a district employee's time and mileage).
- Expenses to hire entertainment at annual meetings or other functions.

The Missouri Soil and Water Conservation District Employees Association (MSWCDEA) is composed of employees whose salary is provided by state funds. MSWCDEA engages in efforts to lobby state legislators, and as a result, using state funds to pay membership dues, reimburse travel expenses or cover staff time in support of MSWCDEA functions or similar activities is considered a conflict of interest.

As you know, these remain challenging times for the entire country. We will all need to support a program that is as efficient as possible and stays true to its primary mission of assisting the agricultural landowners of the state to remain good stewards of our natural resources.



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